



Reminders and Remembrances of Joseph Meiers, M.D.

Annie Dix Meiers

Early Associations in New York

Last week, I put back Joseph's many framed diplomas, memberships, and citations that had been taken down when the apartment was painted. Although they have been before my eyes for many years, I reread them with interest.

In the hallway, there is one citation, beautifully inscribed in calligraphy, that reads:

*NEW YORK CHAPTER
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF GROUP
PSYCHOTHERAPY AND PSYCHODRAMA
PRESENTS THIS AWARD TO
JOSEPH MEIERS, M.D.*

in recognition of his long and devoted service at the local and national levels of this organization and in recognition of his many contributions to the theory and practice of group psychotherapy and psychodrama. 16th day of November, 1963.

This was the very first group with which Joseph associated himself after coming to the United States in 1939. Dr. Jacob Moreno, who was also a recent arrival, had brought with him the therapeutic method of psychodrama that he had used in his psychiatric practice in Vienna, and with it, the techniques of group therapy. These approaches appealed to Joseph. In the early 1940s, he became an active member of the Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama and participated with Moreno, acting as resident psychiatrist at the Moreno Sanitarium in Beacon, New York, in the summer of 1951.

Joseph's first three articles in his new language, English, were published in the two Moreno journals,

Sociometry and Sociatry. He later published frequently in the third Moreno journal, *Group Psychotherapy*.

Another group whose philosophy Joseph found congenial was the New York Society of General Semantics. Unlike *semantics*, which deals with the meaning of words, *General Semantics* (so named by its founder, Alfred Korzybski) emphasizes the understanding and communication between people, in which many factors other than words play a part. It may be briefly described as the study of language in its relation to human behavior.

At Joseph's death in 1985, the *General Semantics Bulletin*, an international publication, carried two memorial articles and a portrait of Joseph. An incident recorded in the article by Robert Pula, senior editor, describes Joseph more clearly than any other words of tribute. The occasion was the summer seminar of General Semantics at Bard College in New York State, and the date was 1966, the decade of student revolt throughout the country. Pula wrote:

This was in the late sixties, and we inevitably had a young firebrand in our group. . . . After Joe's comments about behavior in the group, the young man leaped from his chair and shouted at Joe, "What the hell are you, some kind of shrink?" Well, Joe was nothing if not professional. He responded quietly and in an even voice tinged with what seemed like paternal affection: "But you see how you are shouting. What is it that makes you shout so?" The young man was not pleased . . . and sat down in a disgruntled heap. But beginning not many days later, he and Joe were seen consulting on a regular, relaxed, somewhat bantering basis.

In 1945, Dr. Kurt Goldstein, the famed neuropsychiatrist, came to live permanently in New York City. He had been Joseph's teacher in Berlin, had married Joseph's cousin, and became for Joseph a beloved friend and mentor.

From him, Joseph had taken many principles which were basic in his practice. One of these was "holism," the necessity for the physician to consider *the organism as a whole*: the patient's body, mind, personality, experience—everything that makes him what he is, including the human society of which he is a part.

Goldstein was best known as a neurologist, a neurosurgeon during the First World War. This emphasis on the human body made Joseph, the psychiatrist, even more aware of the *organism as a whole*. In his later work at the Institute of the Adler Center, he introduced psychosomatic medicine as a required course in training Adlerian therapists.

During these early, anxious years, before he secured his citizenship and license to practice medicine in New York State, Joseph held temporary positions at various mental hospitals near New York City. He became a

member, later Fellow, of the Association for the Advancement of Psychotherapy and the Virchow Society, both organizations founded by doctors from central Europe who had been displaced by the Nazi regime.

In the publication of the Association for Advancement of Psychotherapy, the *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, Joseph found a place for publication of book reviews, comments, and a bibliography of his friend, Dr. Paul Federn, one of Freud's "ringbearers."

He later became a member of the American Psychiatric Association and was elected Fellow of the New York Academy of Medicine.

However, it was the influence of Alfred Adler that was predominant in Joseph's practice for the last fifty years of his life. The contributions of the other three—Moreno, Korzybski, and Goldstein—were compatible with Adlerian theory. The methods and insights they offered enhanced the flexibility of his practice.

Introduction to Alfred Adler

On Joseph's office wall there is another citation, this one signed by Harold McAbee, president of the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology, 1978–79, that says:

BE IT KNOWN BY ALL PERSONS THAT
JOSEPH MEIERS, M.D.

has rendered exemplary service in the cause of Individual Psychology by virtue of his many fruitful ideas and unflagging encouragement to the president and other leaders of NASAP.

This Presidential Citation is presented in heartfelt appreciation on occasion of the 28th annual convention.

Joseph had learned about Adler while he was still a boy in his teens in Riga. His younger brother, Hellmuth, suffered severely from asthma, for which there was then no known remedy.

The fame of a certain Dr. Alfred Adler in Vienna had spread as far abroad as Latvia, for his care and success in helping children who had problems. Possibly asthma was a symptom of a problem that Dr. Adler could help, reasoned Joseph's mother. So she took her 12-year-old son on the long journey south to Vienna.

Medically, the journey was fruitless. But the personality of the doctor, encouraging and inspiring, made the trip worthwhile. Joseph listened with rapt attention to Hellmuth's enthusiastic report of the great doctor.

The years passed. Joseph became a medical student at the University of Berlin. The first World War had claimed many students into military service; but as a Latvian national, not a German, he was exempt from the draft.

However, as a medical student, he volunteered as a "Red Cross man in the field," serving eventually in the fiercest fighting on the Western Front, until a shrapnel blast disabled him and he had to withdraw from active service.

Then came graduation, achievement of his M.D. degree, and the beginning of his medical practice in Berlin.

The following year, 1926, he learned by mere chance that Adler was in Berlin to give a course of lectures. Remembering Hellmuth's experience with the doctor, he eagerly joined the group and took the complete course with Adler.

He tells of his first impression of Adler: "He could be likened to a musical instrument of enormous magnitude—the violin-cello—which became alive when he spoke. It was what he said, his spirited approach, his deep, wide-flung philosophy, his irresistible goal-mindedness—this in large part won me over." Forever after, he referred to Adler as "my great teacher."

One of the bases of Adler's therapy was *social interest*. No one can be called fully healthy unless he has *that concern for others that takes him out of himself*. Joseph had been prepared for this since childhood by the example of his grandfather, Dr. Salomon Neumann, one of the pioneers of social medicine in Germany.

Seven years later, 1933, to escape arrest by the Nazis, he fled to his mother's home in Riga. There he found a small Adlerian group, with whose help he founded a consultation center for Jewish young people, called OZE, a Russian acronym for "Health Preservation of Jews."

Practice in New York City

In New York, soon after the Alfred Adler Consultation Center was formed, he offered his services. In 1954, he became one of the Supervising Psychiatrists; and for the next 30 years he served in that capacity, treating patients in the Clinic and teaching in the Institute, the training branch of the Center.

In Joseph's private practice, as with all psychiatrists, he saw patients individually. But he also saw great value in group therapy. He formed a group that lasted as a Reunion Group many years after need for therapy had passed.

In addition, he used a *non-cofacial group method* to treat "those who did not want to be treated," who denied their illness though it was unbearably disruptive of family life or business. In this, he and the patient did not see, or face, each other. It was the parent or other "link" person who came to the doctor regularly for consultation on the patient's behalf.

He explained this method in his article "Intermediary Distantial Therapy," in *Essays in Individual Psychology*. (Adler, K. A., & Deutsch, D., New York: Grove Press, 1959.)

He was always available to his patients, encouraging them to phone him whenever they needed him. This was good, except when he was in Europe with a six-hour time difference, which the patient did not understand. He charged only what he knew the patient could bear, and on occasion gave financial aid when a patient needed the help of a specialist he could not afford.

His social interest drew him beyond his private patients to the humblest and most heavily burdened among us. Another citation, dated 2 December, 1965, testifies that

THE COMMISSIONER OF HOSPITALS
OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

does hereby commend for distinguished and exceptional service
JOSEPH MEIERS, M.D.

whose public benefactions in ministering to the indigent sick as an active member of the SYDENHAM HOSPITAL visiting staff for a period of 12 years have gained for him the heartfelt gratitude and deep appreciation of the people of the City of New York.

It was not only the "indigent sick" for whom he cared. Many times did I attend with Joseph the meetings of an Alcoholics Anonymous group in Harlem. There was fellowship among those still burdened and those who could thankfully celebrate victory, even if only for a short time so far. Never in my life have I heard more eloquent affirmations than from those who rose to testify to their years, months, or even weeks of sobriety, and to invite others to join in their celebration.

NASAP

New York, however, was not the only center of Adlerian activity. Local chapters were established in dozens of cities throughout the United States and Canada. These chapters were all brought together into the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology. Joseph had many warm friends throughout the two countries, and he attended and contributed to the national conventions as long as his health permitted.

As historian of the national organization, Joseph strove to make NASAP aware of its past as a challenge to its future. He delighted in unearthing material and bits of relevant information and adding them to the archives of the Society.

When he was 87 years old, his autobiography was published in the

Journal of Individual Psychology, November 1981. He entitled it "An Adlerian Physician's Mostly Non-Medical Life Story."

As the oldest Adlerian in NASAP, an elder statesman, he felt a responsibility to give counsel when he could—asked or unasked. At the time of his death, one of the leaders in NASAP wrote:

For me, and many other Adlerians I have spoken to, one of life's memorable events has been phone calls from Dr. Joseph Meiers. This is not to deny the importance of talks we have heard him give, or the value of his writings or his presentations at meetings. It is just that there is something incredibly special about a call from Dr. Meiers.

Most of the calls I have received came from ten to midnight; and they all began in response to my bland "Hello," "Meiers of New York." Then with little or no preface, down to business. "This needs to be done . . ." "Have you considered that . . ." "Have you heard and what should be done about . . ."

The phone ringing late at night is like that bell that sounds in our heads to tell us we are off course, or have forgotten what is important. A call from, a thought from, a thought of, Dr. Meiers is a reminder of what we are all about. Joseph Meiers has become and will remain the conscience of Adlerians.

International Activity

But Joseph's interest and participation in Adlerian activities extended beyond the North American continent.

In fact, our first trip to Europe together was in 1962 to attend an informal study group under the leadership of Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs of Chicago. This meeting in Helsingør, Denmark, was the forerunner of the international Adlerian summer study group that later became known as ICASSI.

In England, we often attended the annual weekend summer school of the Adlerian Society of Great Britain, meeting for the first years at T.S. Eliot College in Canterbury and later at St. Hilda's College in Oxford. The international Adlerian organ, the *Individual Psychology News Letter*, was published in London by another student of Adler, Paul Rom, who gratefully accepted Joseph's contributions and shared his friendship.

In France, an editorial group published the *Bulletin de Société Française de Psychologie Adlérienne*. The president and founder of the French Société was Dr. Herbert Schaffer, who, like Joseph and Paul Rom, had been a student of Adler. At his death in 1978, the French group published a memorial to him, entitled *Herbert Schaffer: Disciple et Continuateur d'Alfred Adler*, to which Joseph was invited to contribute. His article was called simply "My Friend, Herbert Schaffer."

In the summer of 1984, Joseph and I were in Switzerland, as usual in the villa in Fenil that had become our summer home. Paul Rom had died, and the responsibility for editing the *IPNL* had passed to a young Adlerian

in Munich, Horst Gröner. He wished to write an article for Joseph's ninetieth birthday, and Joseph wished very much to meet him. Therefore, at our invitation, he came to see Joseph in Fenil. In the next issue of the *IPNL*, he published the text of his interview.

His first question was. "What does Individual Psychology mean to you?"

Joseph answered at length, concluding: "Social Interest is not only vital to Individual Psychology, but to the building of every individual personality, and hence of whole families, including the children, the parents, the grandparents. . . . The necessity for social interest becomes obvious when it comes to building a community, a state, and finally the United Nations."

His Death and Tributes

Joseph died on March 3, 1985. Dr. Alexandra Adler, the daughter of Alfred Adler, and Robert Powers, former president of NASAP, were among those who spoke at his memorial service.

For a month before his death, Sylvia Robbins of the New York chapter had been planning a tribute to our "nonagenarian Adlerian." She had invited several leaders in NASAP to send messages of congratulation to Joseph for his ninetieth birthday. These messages were to be read at the Regional meeting of NASAP in New York City. When word came of Joseph's death a few days before the meeting, the celebration was changed into a memorial for him. Excerpts from the messages include: "He knew how to relieve suffering with tender concern and to demolish self-pity with a fresh challenge to courage." "He called attention to the importance of our history and the necessity for seeing that it is not lost." "His moral fiber, the courage of his convictions regarding Social Interest, his true dedication to the well-being of mankind—these will make him stand out." "He became the voice among Adlerians reminding them of their social responsibilities far beyond the consultation room."

Two weeks after Joseph's death, this letter came to him from Helen Anderson in London: "It is with greatest pleasure that I write to tell you that the Council of the Adlerian Society of Great Britain has agreed unanimously to confer upon you Fellowship in ASGB in recognition of your very great contribution to the Adlerian movement. We shall indeed deem it an honor to number you amongst our very few Fellows."

In my reply, I said that "Joseph would have been very happy to accept the honor because ASGB was very dear to his heart. He felt so completely at home among you."

Had Joseph lived, he would have been happy to receive, in the summer of 1987, a copy of the book by his friends, Robert Powers and Jane Griffith, *Understanding Life-Style: The Psycho-Clarity Process* (Chicago: AIAS, 1987). During Bob's term as president of NASAP, he had found in Joseph an understanding and encouraging friend. The dedication of the book was to:

Joseph Immanuel Meiers
1894-1985

"Because life is hard, we must struggle hard to
overcome its difficulties."

One of Adler's earliest students, he was a model for the Adlerian practice of psychiatric medicine. As compassionate in his regard for the overburdened soul as he was unmoved by the alibis of a hesitant one, he knew how to spur both to further effort.

Joseph would have read these words with pride and gratitude.

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